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AUTHOR Yoshida, Kin'ei
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ABSTRACT

A bilingual (Japanese/English) electronic mail survey of over 1,100 computer science students at the University of Aizu elicited recommendations for content and design of a curriculum in English for Special Purposes (ESP). Features students preferred included these: a four-skills introductory course during the first year; materials encouraging deep thinking; course instruction that is immediately applicable; balance of language and technical training; out-of-class opportunities for English use; student placement by skill level; electives suited to student needs and interests at each skill level; class size limited to 10-15 students; instruction becoming more discipline-specific over time; student choice of teacher and teaching style; more but shorter classes; freedom to design or select assignments; English-only areas at the university; exchange programs; self-paced courses; some short, intensive courses; more English writing assignments across the curriculum; and the option to test out of courses, for high-ability students. Recommendations for features to avoid included: non-motivating courses and materials; native language use in class; artificial English speaking activities; lazy students; heterogeneous grouping; too-difficult or -easy assignments and grading; large discussion classes; non-discipline-related course material; underqualified teachers; too-busy teachers; overemphasis on drills and exercises; and course decisions without student input. The questionnaire is appended. (MSE)

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Student Recommendations for ESP Curriculum Design

Kin'ei Yoshida
Department of Software Engineering
University of Aizu, Japan

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Abstract

This short article reports the recommendations for ESP curriculums from a survey of 1,100 Japanese students studying English for the field of compu[illegible] science and software/hardware engineering.

Introduction

When educators begin to plan ESP curriculums, they often consult books and journal articles to see what other scholars have written on the subject, they check publisher catalogues for useful textbooks, they visit programs and talk to teachers at other ESP sites, they interview specialists in the target vocation or profession, and they gather samples of spoken and written discourse for analysis. One activity ESP educators often overlook, however, is consultation with the learners who will and/or have benefited from the proposed ESP program, an important activity seldom forgotten in EFL but frequently forgotten in ESP. The intent of this brief paper is to provide some input to ESP educators useful to ESP curriculum design from the people who are affected most by the designers' decisions: students.

Research

The data for this research was collected between November 5th and December 11th of 1997 via a bilingual (English and Japanese) e-mail survey sent to over 1,100 students in the Department of Computer Software and the Department of Computer Hardware at the University of Aizu. Responses were collected from students and divided according to recommendations for inclusion in our ESP program and criticisms of features to avoid in our ESP program. A copy of the survey appears at the end of this paper in the Appendix.

Results

The results from student responses to the e-mail questionnaire have been organized and summarized below:

Features to Include in an ESP Program

- a 4-skills introductory/preparatory course during the 1st year
- course materials that encourage students to think deeply rather than merely memorize language rules, vocabulary, and miscellaneous facts
- course instruction that is immediately applicable to current studies and daily activities
- courses that balance language/knowledge input with training in language/knowledge output in the first year (i.e., writing, speaking, discussion, and pronunciation)

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- many out-of-class opportunities for students to use English in natural settings (e.g., social activities with foreign students/faculty on weekends)
- division of students according to skill level (e.g., basic, regular, advanced)
- electives suited to the needs and interests of students at each skill level (e.g., vocabulary development for basic level students, discussion courses for advanced students)
- a 10-15 student limit for speaking or discussion classes
- broader ESP instruction the freshman year and progressively more discipline-specific ESP instruction in the sophomore, junior and senior year
- uniquely designed ESP courses by each professor and the option for students to select the professors, courses, and teaching styles they like the best (e.g., five different speaking courses with different content and instructional approaches offered by five different professors; students would be allowed to choose the course and professor that best fit their individual needs and interests. If few or no students enroll in a particular professor's courses, the professor should be replaced.)
- three 30-minute courses per week rather than one 90-minute course
- a certain amount of freedom to design or select one's own assignments
- English-only dormitories or other English-only territories (e.g., English classrooms, English professor's offices, and the hallways and lounges in between; specified tables in the university dining hall.)
- various exchange programs with universities abroad (differing in length, study focus, and cost) for students to select from
- self-paced courses that give students the freedom to study as much as they want and for as long as they want (e.g., one student might select to do 20 lessons in ten weeks while another chooses to do only 5 lessons in one year)
- the use of TOEFL scores to help determine student advancement (e.g., 400 to enter freshman courses, 450 to enter sophomore courses, 500 to enter junior courses, 550 to enter senior courses, and 600 to graduate)
- short, intensive ESP courses during spring or summer vacation
- more English writing assignments in all university courses
- the option to test out of courses if a student's ability is already quite high

Features to Avoid in an ESP Program

- course material and activities that demotivate students (e.g., material and activities that are irrelevant to student interests and needs, that appear to have no purpose other than keeping students busy)
- the use of a student's native language in an ESP course (e.g., Japanese) by students and professors, except for very special occasions
- artificial English conversation/speaking activities instead of genuine conversation and discussion
- lazy students
- mixing students of different language skills and levels of interest in the same class
- homework and exams that are too difficult or too easy
- course grades that are too harsh or too mild

- large enrollments for speaking or discussion courses
- course material that is not related to a student's current academic life or field of study
- professors with low academic or English language qualifications (e.g., computer science professors who can't write papers in English or who score less than 600 on the TOEFL test)
- professors who are too busy to chat with students
- too much time on drills and exercises rather than on authentic listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities
- decisions about ESP courses without input from students

Discussion

In the items summarized above, it is clear to see that students have many opinions about how to improve the ESP program (and the computer science program) at the University of Aizu. Some students want to see improvement in the curriculum, by suggesting how to improve course content and course teaching methods or by expanding opportunities for authentic use of English on or off campus. Other students want to see improvement in the character and qualifications of some of their classmates and some of their professors. They recommend that students be more diligent with their studies and that some of their professors be more diligent in self-improvement.

From these comments, we can observe that there are two approaches to creating a good university ESP program. One approach is to build a good curriculum, and the other approach is to build good character. I think both are necessary for a successful program. Excellent classes, excellent classmates, and excellent professors make a very nice environment for study.

Of course, most of the students who answered the questionnaire were very positive about the current University of Aizu ESP program and are very proud of their university. They think it is one of the best programs in the world. Generally, they said that they liked their courses and their professors very much. However, it is important to let all students tell their opinion. If some students have an idea or a complaint we should listen to them. I think this is very important. If a student feels that there is a problem with something, he or she may lose motivation for studying and damage the university atmosphere for other students. This is not good because many Japanese students are strongly affected by the surrounding environment and the attitudes of other students. If a few students begin to think negatively, many other students may begin to think negatively too. This is not good for our studies.

Strong students have many interests and don't mind the hardship of studying hard to reach their goals. Weak students don't have a clear goal, easily lose interest in their studies, and soon become negative about everything. Teachers can help both the strong students and the weak students by making a nice ESP curriculum and a positive environment for learning. With these two approaches the University of Aizu can make an even better ESP program and other universities can improve their ESP program by studying our program. I hope more universities in Japan and abroad will make successful ESP programs for their students.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank Dr. Thomas Orr for his kind advice and assistance in conducting this research and writing this article.

Appendix

This letter was e-mailed to all University of Aizu graduate and undergraduate students in English and in Japanese. A copy of the English version appears below.

All Students:

Please answer the following questions before December 11 for our important research. Your answers will help us improve English education at the University of Aizu. Return your answers to t-orr@u-aizu.ac.jp and s1041157@u-aizu.ac.jp in Japanese or English.

Thank you.

Mr. Kin'ei Yoshida
Dr. Thomas Orr

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The English curriculum at the University of Aizu is designed to prepare students for academic English (used in University of Aizu courses and projects) and for computer science English (used by computer scientists and engineers in their professional work). We would like to know your honest opinions about this English curriculum.

1. Based on your experience, what features of the University of Aizu English curriculum have been helpful for you?

2. Based on your experience, what features of the University of Aizu English curriculum have NOT been helpful for you?

3. What would you like to see added or changed in the University of Aizu English curriculum?